



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

MAN PLEADS GUILTY TO OPERATING ILLEGAL MONEY TRANSFER FIRM IN VIRGINIA THAT MOVED MILLIONS TO MIDDLE EAST

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Paul J. McNulty, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, announced today that Louay Habbal, age 45, a naturalized United States citizen from Syria, and resident of Vienna, Virginia, pleaded guilty today in U.S. District Court in Alexandria Virginia, to operating an unlicensed money service business.

On March 15, 2005, special agents and task force officers from the Annandale, Virginia, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) and Money Laundering Initiative arrested Habbal after he was indicted by a federal grand jury, which charged him with operating Mena Exchange, an unlicensed money transmittal business, from his residence in Vienna, Virginia. He was arrested upon his arrival at Dulles International Airport on a flight from Damascus, Syria.

Habbal appeared before U.S. District Court Judge Cacheris in Alexandria today. He will be sentenced on October 7, 2005. As part of the guilty plea, Habbal agreed to forfeit \$114,237.65. Habbal admitted receiving over \$6 million dollars from customers in the United States between December, 2003 and March, 2005, and deposited those funds in bank accounts in Virginia and elsewhere. After taking a portion of these monies as a fee, Habbal then transferred the remaining funds to other entities for further transfer to individuals overseas who had been designated by his U.S. customers.

Habbal also admitted that he advertised his business through a website called MenaExchange.com, and that although he was aware he needed a Virginia state license to operate such a business, he operated without obtaining the license. The website described Mena Exchange as a service provided by Mena First Capital, LLC, which transmitted funds between the United States, Middle East and North Africa.

Mr. McNulty stated, "We know that terrorists and other criminals use illegal money transfers to support themselves and to fund their operations. While there is no evidence of a link to terrorism in

this case, we aggressively prosecute unlicensed money transmitters to deprive terrorists and other criminals of a potential vehicle to facilitate their crimes.”

Also making this announcement is Allan J. Doody, Special Agent-in-Charge of ICE in Washington, D.C., Charles R. Pine, Special Agent-in-Charge, Internal Revenue Service and Leo J. Rossiter, Chief of Police for the Washington-Metropolitan Airport Authority.

“This case demonstrates the threat posed by unlicensed money transmittal businesses,” said Allan Doody. “Any criminal or terrorist can come to these underground businesses and have their millions wired anywhere in the world in a matter of seconds with no questions asked.”

Mr. Pine stated: "The use of unlicensed money transfer businesses is an emerging area for law enforcement because of its potential use by money launderers and terrorists. This investigation showcases the cooperation among law enforcement for the common goal of national security."

This case was investigated by the Annandale HIDTA Money Laundering Initiative, an ICE-led group composed of task force officers from the FBI; U.S. Secret Service; Internal Revenue Service; Criminal Investigations; Virginia State Police; Virginia Attorney General's Office; and Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority, Metropolitan, Prince William County, Arlington and Alexandria Police Departments. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Steve Mellin and Special Assistant United States Attorney Jessica Lombardo.

#ICE#

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.